**Red Dog** (extract of article) Written by Elizabeth Bryer

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**IT** was a lazy Saturday morning. The winter sun was throwing a pallid wash through the lounge-room window. I needed to go to the market, but breakfast, first: the steam curling upwards from the porridge, dampening my face; the newspaper stiff in its tight roll. I scratched for the edge of the plastic, found it and peeled back the thin film, relished its sticky roar.

When the paper fell free I smoothed and bent its pages out of their rigid waves and extracted my favourite liftout. Flipped through the pages, blowing on spoonfuls of porridge. Stopped. A picture of a kelpie from – skimming, skimming – a ‘family movie...opening this week', one that was called – yes, here it was, here was the proof to spite the incredulous surely not! mantra pulsing through me – called Red Dog.

**TAKE 1:** As a child I never committed to memory my father's exact words, but I did hold on to the red and blue images they called up. These were of desert sand and open sea, of fierce, humid heat that only cold beer could alleviate, of coral trout, red emperor and mackerel that leapt into his and his mates' tinnies and were thrown on a fire after they made landfall on whichever island was closest.

In my mother's stories, it was a place where occupants ran the air conditioning all the time to stop mould speckling and swelling over walls and clothes. Where the red dust meant that the failure to remove one's shoes before entering another's house was the height of rudeness. Where the hot-water systems were switched off to supply the houses with cool water, since the cold taps, attached to pipes that coursed through the scorching heat, delivered the water hot.

It was a time of dinner parties, of working hard and saving and, before then – which is to say, before her arrival – of calling single men's quarters ‘home'. In my child's mind it was preparation time for the real life, the one that would begin when she fell pregnant and they returned to the fold of family back east, where, with what they'd saved, they could now afford to build a house in which to raise their children.

These hand-me-down images, as much a part of my childhood as the reality of 1990s country Victoria, were tethered to an actual time and place: mid-1970s to mid-1980s Dampier, a port town in Western Australia's Pilbara region that was developed in the 1960s to accommodate the workforce of the Hamersley Iron mining company.

At the centre of my images was my dad, who lived in the real-world equivalent of their setting for eleven years; Mum joined him for the final five. The real him didn't like being the centre of anything but he was the indisputable hero of my imaginings, always pitted against extremes, always occupying a world that was hotter and tougher and larger than the one I knew: there was the story of him hooking a hammerhead; there was his driving two-kilometre-long trains; there was that time his train couldn't move up a rise because of a plague of mice squelching beneath its wheels. He corrects me on this last incident when I mention it because it happened in the Mallee, but the Mallee wasn't where my child's mind situated him.

At the time of my concocting these images of his past, Dad was still bearded, still had a hard, round belly that was a much better pillow than Mum's soft one. Still performed incredible feats: tossed me, squealing, into the air; opened all the jars; heaved the trailer, single-handed, onto the towbar; caught pesky flies with a precise swipe of his hand. It was only natural that the version of him that was brought out by Dampier was, to my mind, the true one.

But the most striking images, the ones that became a kind of mental shorthand for that time and place in my parents' past, were those of a character that Dad invoked again and again, knowing, I guess, that he would appeal to a child. Dad called him Red Dog.

‘His owner died,' he'd say, ‘so he travelled around with whoever he could. He'd wait by the road, take the bus, or we'd see him at the pub and afterwards he'd jump into the Valiant and ride with us to the quarters.' I'd nod, unsurprised. All kids knew dogs were smart.

‘Aloof, he was; thought he was human. Usually if you pat a dog it'll show some sort of affection, won't it? Well not Red Dog. You were his equal.

‘Once a mate said to him, "Out you hop," tried to get him out for some reason, and the mongrel bit him, ha! He'd get out only and exactly when he felt like it. We'd call out, "Yeah, no worries, Red Dog," because he never showed any sign of appreciation, just leapt out and trotted off.'

That's what he would say – quickly; he always hurried out any story, as if to suggest that if the facts weren't enough then it wasn't a good story – and then he would shake his head, blink rapidly and rest his gaze on something in the distance.